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Heed the Fire



Tipitaka Yaw Sayadaw

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by TAF
in collaboration with Nyein Nyein Chan Chan

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528 Publications

A GIFT OF DHAMMA—NOT FOR SALE

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The fire in the kitchen is not the real enemy.

We have all heard since we were young, that fire is one of the five enemies in the world.¹ We can know this by having been a victim of fire ourselves, or by hearing about others who have been victims. The question is, realizing that fire is an enemy, how should we regard it? Well, knowing that thieves and criminals are enemies, we lock our doors and watch over our homes so they can't get in.

"Hey, fire, you're our enemy.² Stay away from our homes. You're not allowed in." Why don't we try cutting fire off from our homes for a day? No one would be able to do anything. If we did away with fire, we'd no longer be able to work.

With regard to our children, parents, and relatives, who are so dear to us, we can be separated from them for a day or a week and it's not a big deal. We can even be apart from them for a month at a time. Or, when someone goes away to school, we might be separated for several years. So, it's possible for us to be without our loved ones for quite some time.

Yet when it comes to fire, our "enemy," we can't be separated from it for a single day. When we want to cook rice, we can't do it by the heat of the sun. And we can't make it just by soaking it in a pot of water. We can only make it by cooking it with heat. We wouldn't feel right pointing our fingers at the fire that cooks our food and calling it an enemy. On the contrary, it's a great friend and benefactor because it allows us to eat.

Without fire, we just wouldn't be able to get by. It wouldn't be sensible to say, "We shouldn't use fire because it might burn things." Instead, we should just be forewarned: "We all have to use fire, even though it can burn. Therefore, we must only use it carefully." Meat, fish, and vegetables can only be cooked with fire. It's an incredible supporter that helps sustain us.

Not to mention, it delivers light in the dark of the night. So why would we call fire, which gives such important benefits, an enemy? Essentially because of people. Because people who lack the ability to understand and reason are told it's an enemy. People are to

¹ Five enemies: water, fire, bad king/government, thief, bad inheritor. [Cūla Dukkakkhandha Sutta, Majjhima Nikāya 14].

² "Fire," here is understood also as electricity, gas, etc.

blame. At times, fire does end up burning people or things, but it only does so because people handle it carelessly. After all, we use fire *because* it burns. If fire was cold, it wouldn't be useful for us in these ways.

Although we need and use fire every day, it doesn't possess any acumen. It can't know to selectively, "pass by and avoid *this* because people don't want it to burn, and go ahead and burn *that* because people do want it to burn." Only people can have this kind of consideration, so we must use fire cautiously. And in the same way, only people can carry out their intentions to actualize them.

If we don't want to burn things that shouldn't be burned, and only want to burn things that should be burned, we have to be heedful of fire. Similarly, if we don't want to be responsible for unskillful actions, and only want to be responsible for skillful actions, we'll absolutely have to be heedful of the fire. If we can have *sati* in regards to fire, we can reclaim our minds from our *kilesā*. In fact, *kilesā* are not as strong as *sati*. If we have the presence of mind that is *sati*, wisdom will follow. So, we will get benefits if we are using fire with *sati*.

As we can't be apart from fire, it's everywhere. We all use it on a daily basis and whenever *sati* is absent, trouble ensues. Seeing that homes, wealth, and even lives can be destroyed by it, the losses due to fire become so great that we aren't even able to measure them. But apart from fire, and even more so than fire – many times more, we are burning with mental states such as sorrow, lamentation, and grief; we can suffer to the degree that we can nearly lose our minds.

In the past, we've experienced countless losses, all from being burned due to carelessness and a lack of *sati*. And now, with every absence of *sati*, the burning continues. Likewise, in the future, whenever *sati* isn't present, the fires will inevitably burn. We'll have a great deal of losses now—and in the future—due to this lack of *sati*. This is how fire has been given a bad name. People use it without control. If we use it with restraint, we'll be happier and more at peace. In other words, in order to be well and happy, we have to raise the quality of our actions by maintaining *sati* in relation to fire. We can't live without fire, so we just have to be heedful of it.

We're always reminded to be careful with fire since our homes and all our belongings are constructed out of flammable material and they can catch fire at any time. As for places where there is gasoline, there are strict warnings like "no smoking" and "fire hazard." There are "highly flammable" and "dangerous" warnings on trucks that transport fuel.

It's the same from the point of view of Dhamma: we're all constructed of mind and matter which are themselves flammable material and the fuel for the noble truth of *dukkha*. Things can catch fire at any time, and we are burning, i.e., suffering, at any given time. That's why we always must be heedful of fire.

We should take care to prevent fires before they occur in the first place. In the case that something does ignite, we should be prepared to put it out with whatever tools are available to us. And in the event that something is really burning, we have to do everything we can to save our property from going up in flames. If we can't actually extinguish the fire, then all we can do is try to spare some belongings. We'll only save the items that we can wrest from the fire; the remaining things will be lost.

With the sati wisdom (wisdom that arises with mindfulness as its base) that is gained by striving in Dhamma practice and doing meritorious acts, we can pull out the things of value that are inside the burning house of *khandhas* – in particular the power of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *vipassanā*.³ We have to have a sense of urgency. *Hey, act quickly. Everything is going to go up in flames!* We can't be complacent. We always have to be heedful of the fire.

³ There are three bases of meritorious actions: *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā*. [Lokavipatti Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya 8.36].

To put out the fires, we have to know the truth.

All of nature, which is contained within the four noble truths, can be condensed down to one line: “Vayadhammā saṅkhārā appamādena sampādettha.”^{4,5} “Vayadhammā saṅkhārā” indicates dukkha. Saṅkhārā dukkha includes all dukkha. Dukkha does not appear unprompted, as if it has just fallen from the sky. Rather, it arises due to our craving from past lives. Therefore, the term “dukkha” includes samudaya. So we can say this phrase, “vayadhammā saṅkhārā,” indicates two noble truths: dukkha (stress, suffering) and samudaya dukkha (the origin of stress and suffering).

“Appamādena sampādettha” illustrates the essence of the noble eightfold path, the rules of conduct and practice of the Buddha’s teaching, so it signifies magga (the path). The term “sati” encompasses the entire practice. Practicing the mundane eightfold path leads to the transcendent eightfold path.⁶ If we follow the correct path, we are guaranteed to reach the goal, which is nirodha (cessation). So this last phrase (appamādena sampādettha) indicates the next two noble truths, magga and nirodha. That’s why from “vayadhammā saṅkhārā” there is dukkha samudaya, and from “appamādena sampādettha” there is nirodha magga. Altogether, this shows the four noble truths.

Accordingly, “vayadhammā saṅkhārā” can be condensed down to fire (the internal fires of unpleasant mental states, and the external fires of the many ways we may be physically harmed), and “appamādena sampādettha,” can be reduced to sati. So, “fire” implies dukkha and samudaya, and “sati” implies nirodha and magga. By saying “Heed the fire,” we are pointing to the four noble truths. “Vayadhammā saṅkhārā” corresponds to our day-to-day reality, while “appamādena sampādettha” corresponds to awareness. Our awareness should be the master of our experience. Having the ability to oversee our

⁴ The four noble truths: dukkha (stress and suffering), dukkha samudaya (the origin of dukkha), dukkha nirodha (the cessation of dukkha), dukkha nirodha gāminī patipada (the path leading to the cessation of dukkha). [Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya 56:11].

⁵ Translation: All conditioned things are subject to decay. Strive on with heedfulness.

⁶ Transcendent eightfold path (lokuttara maggaṅga): the path that leads to awakening.

Mundane eightfold path (lokiya maggaṅga): the path that develops when one first starts practicing the threefold training and, once mature, leads to the transcendent eightfold path.

experience with awareness is the main advantage of being human. In view of being heedful of fire, we should ask:

1. Where are the fires?
2. Why are they burning? Who is negligent?
3. When will they be extinguished?
4. Who will be heedful and actually put them out?

If we pose these questions, we will see that the answers correspond to the four noble truths.

Where are the fires burning? Fires are ablaze in the ward of mind and matter, or the five khandhas, i.e., *dukkha sacca*. Some of the fires cannot be put out. There are fires of *saṅkhārā*; fires of aging, illness, and death; fires of greed, anger, and delusion; and fires of attachment to beings and sense objects. If there are *kilesā*, there will be fires. All of the above are continuously ablaze. The longer we do nothing about it, the stronger the fires become. The more we lose our *sati*, the more the heat intensifies. You could say the five khandhas, i.e., *dukkha sacca*, are running riot.

Whose negligence is causing the burning? When we look for the fire starter, we find *samudaya sacca*. Craving, which is governed by ignorance, causes us to be careless when dealing with *dukkha sacca*. Because of this carelessness, fires are burning and we can't completely put them out. As a result of poorly handling *samudaya sacca*, even taking care of ourselves or our families can feel like burning and affliction, can it not? Even after making a generous donation, instead of feeling fulfilled, we can feel like we are burning if we only did it to boast. As much as there is a lack of *sati* wisdom, that's how much ignorance and craving we will welcome in. Doing good deeds and wishing for a particular existence is just adding fuel to our own fires. Each of us is our own enemy. And it's correct to say that inciting ill will is *samudaya sacca*.

When will the fires be extinguished? All of these fires will only be extinguished with the attainment of *nibbāna*, or *nirodha sacca*. It's the law of nature that at this point the fuel for mind and matter, or *dukkha sacca*, comes to an end. There are two types of happiness: the happiness from sense pleasures and the happiness of liberation from *dukkha*. Our drive for the happiness of sense pleasures comes from ignorance and craving. When we seek fuel (sense objects) for sensual experiences, fuel and fire (*kilesā*) meet head-on and we naturally

get burned. Sati wisdom drives us to treasure the happiness of liberation. To attain liberation, we have to strive to not allow fuel and fire to meet. And before attaining nibbāna, we should aim to live in a way that minimizes the heat of dukkha.

If we compare these two types of happiness, the happiness of liberation is surely superior. If we were sick and suffering from a serious illness, it would be much more important to be free from the illness than it would be to obtain sense pleasures. Whatever amount of money we might have saved up to use for enjoyment would be eagerly used for medical treatment instead so we could be cured. If we didn't have enough money, we would sell our valuables and even our homes along with the rest of our belongings. We would sell it all. The most important thing would be to cure our illness. Even if we only partially recovered, it would be worth it.

We would give up not only our external possessions, but we would also relinquish parts of our bodies. For example, we wouldn't have second thoughts about amputating an arm or leg if it meant it would cure a life-threatening disease. Or if we were to find ourselves really in a bind, and were about to go to jail, we would use all of our property and money that we had saved up with sensual pleasures in mind to secure our freedom, because the happiness of freedom is superior to the happiness of sensual pleasures.

When we really see how we're burning with dukkha, freeing ourselves from it becomes much more important than enjoying sense pleasures. Nibbāna is nothing like the happiness derived through enjoying experiences; it's the bliss of liberation, and the end of all ill will.

Who will put out the fires? These fires are extinguished by following magga sacca. The ultimate level of the fourth noble truth can only be realized by a noble person.⁷ For an ordinary person, just the mundane level is possible, i.e., the eightfold path, which can be summarized into the three trainings of sila, samādhi, and vipassanā *paññā*.⁸ And the three trainings can be further boiled down so that everything is inclusive within *appamāda* sati, or vigilant mindfulness. Therefore, it is sati that will put out the fires. If there is sati, wisdom arises. The eightfold path contains the causes leading to the freedom from dukkha; it puts out existing fires, offers protection from additional fires, and, if more fires do occur, it quickly snuffs them out.

When we are making our way in the world, we have to do it while putting out fires with sati wisdom. And if we are supporting a family, we have to do that in a way that puts out these fires. Whatever we do, we must be able to do it while protecting ourselves and others from the dangers of the various fires by giving importance to sati and acting with

⁷ Ariya-puggala: A person who has attained one of the four levels of awakening.

⁸ Puthujjana: One who hasn't yet attained one of the four levels of awakening.

wisdom. We will only have true wisdom if we can see things as they really are. When all of our work is done concerning the path of the three trainings of which sati is the leader, there won't be any more dangers from fire. Troubles will come to an end and mistakes will be few. We'll progress quickly and reach the goal. As for now, we should perform wholesome and skillful actions while we are able to. The fourth noble truth manages to reconcile the conflicts in the heart.

If we can overshadow the khandhas where suffering is occurring with sati wisdom, dukkha can be handled, and the khandhas themselves can be put to good use. The causes of dukkha will lessen and we'll be on our way to liberation. If we know and see things as they truly are and practice according to this knowledge, the fires will surely come to an end.

If we don't know the truth, the fires will burn.

There are eleven types of fires burning in the khandhas.⁹ Greed, anger, and delusion are the three root fires. The source of the heat of dukkha and all our problems comes from these three fires. We can't put out any fires without handling the source and overcoming the root causes. When there is hostility among family members, whenever we encounter turmoil here or there, it's on account of these three fires. Even the fighting of two dogs in the street is due to these three fires. Because of these three root fires, living beings, despite wanting to smile, have to grimace. Despite wanting to be peaceful and happy, we become wearied and burn up.

The fire of greed can go by many other names, for example, "thirst," "craving," or "passion." As for delusion, we can also call it "ignorance," but it has many other names as well. Ignorance is like the president of a company that constructs our experience out of dukkha. It's in control of all dukkha. Craving is like the secretary. It follows the president's direction and creates things with the heat of dukkha.

Whenever living beings are active through thoughts, words, or physical deeds, *kamma* is left behind; it's simply a matter of cause and effect. What we call kamma is just a characteristic of intention, be it skillful/with merit, or unskillful/with demerit. Kamma is combined with ignorance and craving, thereby constructing new khandhas. Although those who don't have ignorance and craving still have kamma, it no longer has the potency to be able to construct new khandhas, just as a seed that lacks an essence may be planted but will not sprout.

For those who aren't yet free from ignorance and craving, their intentions create who they are. We paint our own pictures of ourselves. Our parents only gave us a place in the world. They can't paint our pictures to shape who we are. Whether we are pretty or ugly, intelligent or unintelligent, have a long life or a short life—these things are composed by our kamma. We may want something else other than what we get from our kamma, but that's not possible.

⁹ Eleven types of fires: lobha (greed), dosa (anger), moha (delusion), jāti (birth), jara (old age), maraṇa (death), soka (sorrow), parideva (lamentation), dukkha (stress, pain), domanassa (grief), and upāyāsa (tribulation).

Birth occurs because ignorance and craving, together with intention and the law of kamma, build a new life. And birth is also a fire. When we start a life, it's like opening a dukkha marketplace, acquiring all sorts of dukkha that will be encountered in that life. At a marketplace, no item remains unsold. Everything must go. Likewise, at the birth marketplace, there is dukkha that we cannot evade. Aging will come and peddle its misery. An immense amount of fuel for the dukkha of the khandhas arises from birth, and the fires will burn all life long.

From the time birth occurs, this pattern doesn't stop. Due to the nature of aging, little by little, we come of age and grow up. Only the very obvious signs of aging will appear, but aging is always there. Beings in the celestial and Brahma realms don't show signs of aging; beings such as humans do, and so the fires of old age are ablaze. The growth from childhood to adulthood is the nature of old age.

Although illness is not directly included in the eleven types of fires, it's also a member because it's a form of dukkha. Since there are two types of dukkha—*kāyikadukkha* (bodily pain) and *cetasikadukkha* (mental pain)—we can group illness in with *kāyikadukkha*. Or when we say old age and death, illness can also be included, since we die only after suffering enough pain and illness to bring us there.

Getting pinned down by old age and illness makes life not so easy. Aging and illness come in a pair. Old age says to illness, "Hey illness, my friend, come on, let's go."

They go together and call death, "Hey death, come, we've reached this together. Come meet us."

In this way, they collectively torment us to death. Who can survive them? In the end, we will all be taken by the fire of death.

When we lose what we consider to be ours, our heart strikes a spark and burns. This is the fire of grief that worries and saddens us. The heat of the mind passes to the body, which becomes miserable and wearied. The sadness in the mind can't be controlled, and the fires of lamentation, grief, and sorrow come loudly out of the mouth in the form of weeping and wailing and continue to burn. Because there is birth, the fires of grief and dukkha are ablaze.

The fire of grief and heartache is strong enough to make us faint, which is why we can't just cry out to relieve the pain. Of the eleven fires, it's the strongest. The intensity of this heat is beyond measure. The burning can be so excessive, that some even die. If there is birth, then the fires of aging, illness, and death, which we can't put out, will burn. Nobody can order these fires of dukkha to retreat; they can't be stopped. Only *sati*, if it is one step ahead, can keep the eight remaining fires that are connected with the *kilesā* from burning.

And if they are burning, they can be promptly put out. In this way, the intensity of the heat of kilesā can be weakened with sati.

All eleven fires will be extinguished only when we attain nibbāna, at which point the fuel that is the khandhas doesn't exist. Therefore, we must strive to perfect our development of *dāna*, *sila*, and *bhāvanā*, and aim towards nibbāna by giving priority to sati. When we are on the true path, whatever we do will lead us closer to nibbāna and the cessation of all fires.

Steer the ship against the current.

Dukkha and the world are led by ignorance and craving. Reality as it truly is, is concealed, so we can't see it. Happiness assumes false forms that entice and deceive us. It's a downstream journey that sets sail on the river of *saṃsāra*. If we dare to let ourselves go on this quick fall of a downward journey, we will, of course, find misery.¹⁰

If we go barreling downstream without guidance or protection, we will crash into things. We will capsize and sink, and we'll ultimately be angered, burning hot, and in tears. And by the way, that's not all. We will be pulled to the woeful realms and when we get there, the dukkha is never-ending. When we handle fire carelessly it will burn until the fuel runs out. When the guardian of sati is not present and we are handling the khandhas with ignorance and craving, the fires of kilesā, misery, and suffering will burn as long as the khandha fuel lasts.

Sati is the essence of all the Lord Buddha instructed throughout his forty-five years of teaching. The wisdom that becomes clear due to sati can lead us to the Dhamma, true happiness; it can lead us to see the true nature of reality, and it can lead us on the journey to go upstream against the currents of our kilesā in the great river of *saṃsāra*. When the momentum of *virīya*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*, which are led by sati, is strong, we can easily advance against the strong currents of the kilesā. If we aren't slaves to our urges and emotions, we can have restraint and avoid going adrift with the tide. However, due to the nature of ordinary people, kilesā will arise. But even if kilesā do send us downstream, with the help of *appamāda*, we can still control ourselves enough to avoid crashing into things so we can stay upright and on course. The way of *appamāda* is like a powerful ship in the river of *saṃsāra* that can handle the strong currents of kilesā on the upstream journey.

The wisdom that can overcome ignorance and craving cannot arise just by thinking about it. It arises only after using sati, *virīya*, and *samādhi* to diminish and purify the heat that is causing our suffering. In this way, wisdom can totally put out the fires.

¹⁰ A play on words in the Myanmar language where *hsin-yeh*, “dare to descend” and *hsinyeh*, “be miserable” are homonyms.

Always hold on to your wallet.

Naturally, we get practical experience every day. If we can combine wisdom with personal experience, Dhamma is everywhere. If our personal experience is not combined with wisdom, we will lose life's essence. Wisdom doesn't arise without sati.

People suffer from two types of poverty: the poverty of possessions and the poverty of perception. If your earnings can't cover your daily expenses, you will be facing the poverty of possessions. That's not enough, this isn't enough, that's not adequate, this isn't adequate.... And because you are fretting over your yearning, you can't be interested in performing meritorious deeds. In this way, poverty of possessions leads to the deepest poverty of all, which is the poverty of perception that arises when we are lacking in meritorious deeds.

Even if we have sufficient possessions, if we have scant knowledge or we are without sati (although knowledge is present), then we don't have true intellect. This is another poverty of perception, which means we don't have enough wisdom to properly handle our property and possessions. For those of us who suffer from the poverty of perception, our understanding is governed by our possessions, which end up burning us. We're uninterested in meritorious deeds. Therefore, we can say we are failing; we're in merit poverty.

There once was a villager named Nga Du. One day he put a large amount of money in his bag and went to the city to go shopping. He tucked a sharp knife, which he didn't have a sheath for, in his waistband so he could protect himself in case he encountered bandits along the way.

He was walking for some time when he found himself in the middle of a dense forest and sure enough, he happened upon a bandit at a bend in the path. The bandit was holding a stick in his hand. Aside from this, he didn't have any other weapons.

When the bandit saw Nga Du, he called out, "Hey you – stop! Give me everything you have!"

Nga Du refused.

The bandit warned, "Do you see this stick? You're going to die."

Nga Du replied, “Whatever stick you might have, I still won’t give you anything,” and he made a fist to defend himself.

Nga Du had completely forgotten about the knife he was carrying. He surely would have been able to fend off the bandit with it, but he fought with his fists since he forgot he had it. The bandit hit Nga Du over the head with his stick, leaving him cut and bleeding. He was stunned. As he was stammering around, his waist and thigh were cut by his knife. It was only then that he remembered the fact that he had brought the knife with him. It was too late.

With Nga Du lying dazed on the ground, the bandit grabbed the money from his bag and ran off. Because Nga Du was lacking sati, he experienced a poverty of perception. Not only did his knife fail to protect him from the bandit, he even repeatedly injured himself with it. This is a degree of carelessness that we can really condemn.

Despite Nga Du having both the ability and the knife to protect himself, thanks to carelessness, not only was he unable to do so, but he was also beaten and suffered a wound to his head. What misery! Plus, his waist and thighs got injured, and the bandit made off with his money. How much loss did Nga Du suffer from this instance of lacking sati? Because he wasn’t heedful of the fire, he was burnt by a great dukkha blaze. It’s more upsetting getting into trouble when we have enough resources to protect ourselves with than when we get into trouble while we don’t have anything to use for protection. Every day there are many people who get into trouble because they can’t use their resources in the proper way, due to a lack of sati.

Just as nobody can live without actual fire, all ordinary people can’t live without the fires of kilesā. So, ordinary people must have sati so they will get burned less than they would without it. If we can attach sati to viriya, the worried mind becomes calm; the mind that is agitated becomes quiet. At the very least, we will obtain khaṇika samādhi (momentary concentration). That’s the only way to obtain wisdom that is pure. Therefore, we say that sati wisdom leads the Dhamma.

As for how potent sati wisdom is, it can remove all of a person’s troubles of the heart and mind. If such a thing as sati, viriya, and samādhi can purify and remove even the slightest heat of greed, anger, and delusion, it can by all means overcome the fires on the whole. It’s through experiencing loss that we can draw out what’s most valuable in life, i.e., dāna, sila, samādhi, and vipassanā. Then we become strong enough to have the courage to proclaim, “What do I have to be afraid of?” We become adept at handling life.

We should always keep hold of sati. If we don’t want worries and problems, then we shouldn’t be stingy with our sati. Precious wisdom is to be found inside sati; so, we can say sati is like a wallet. Wisdom can only blossom if there is sati. The wisdom that is prompted

by sati is like money. If there is no money, it's like being poor; we can't buy anything. There is nothing to rely on among our bodies, our possessions, and sense objects, and if there is no wisdom we'll get worn out and disheartened.

A man named Pho Gu was training in Dhamma, and a monk said to him, "Hey, Pho Gu, if you want to practice Dhamma, make sure you don't lose your wallet. Always hold on to it."

So, Pho Gu took his wallet from underneath his pillow and from then on, he always carried it with him. No matter what he was doing—sitting meditation, walking meditation, eating, whatever—Pho Gu always had his wallet with him.

When people saw this, they asked him, "Hey, Pho Gu, why do you carry your wallet with you whenever you practice meditation"?

"A monk told me not to lose my wallet when I practice. He told me to always hold on to it."

"Hey, Pho Gu. He meant that as a metaphor, as in a wallet for holding sati."

"Oh, really"?

"Yeah! What does your effort in Dhamma practice have to do with your wallet? What he was saying was, when you practice Dhamma, always guard your sati so you can develop wisdom through samādhi."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

So, Pho Gu put his wallet back underneath his pillow and began protecting his sati wallet. Then he went all out in his Dhamma practice to cultivate precious samādhi wisdom. We'll only get what we need when we have the currency of wisdom.

The present moment is the most valuable.

Sati is always valuable in the present. The present moment is the most valuable thing in the world. We can act only in the present moment. We can speak of tomorrow, but we can't do anything about it yet. We can speak of yesterday, but we can't do anything about it anymore. We can only act right now. If we can just maintain sati in the present moment, we can get a lot of good accomplished each day. By being steady in the present moment, we can make up for weaknesses in the past and gain reassurance that we will act skillfully in the future.

Among our activities, the things we are currently doing are the most important. When we are walking down the road, walking down the road is the most important thing. If we are eating, eating is the most important thing. If we're at home looking after children, that's the most important thing at that time. When we are cooking, cooking is the most important thing. Whatever we do, while we are in the process of doing it, that is the most important thing.

If we handle every single task with sati, internal fires won't burn, or at least they won't burn as much. We will be free from getting burnt by the various external fires, i.e., dangers, too. In addition, each task will be performed with complete and thorough effort, and when we are finished we will be full of strength, thanks to Dhamma. It's very rewarding!

If we can always hold onto sati while doing any job in the present moment, we can perform our duties and increase our merit at the same time. We must practice to make our sati stronger.

If there is a lack of sati, this life we obtained lacks merit. Bhāvanā only occurs with the presence of sati. If sati is lacking, our tasks and our attention never stick together. Although we don't deliberately increase our troubles, our minds will be distressed both by the tasks and by our kilesā, and our hearts will really suffer. When the mind is in distress, the body suffers, too. That's why demerit proliferates. When sati is present, the strength of the mind emerges. If sati is there, samādhi will increase and spur wisdom, allowing us to overtake the destructive defilements of greed, anger, and delusion. These fires can only be extinguished with bhāvanā if we're heedful.

If we're lacking sati, we are like sickly people, if we have sati, we are true yogis.¹¹ Whenever we lack sati, pains of the mind and body can increase, and we will be ailing. One who is sick and is being pressed down by the kilesā has a life without much merit or value.¹²

If we can maintain sati, we will be true yogis and wield great power. Bhāvanā and the yogi are one and the same. When we eat, we're eating yogis. When we cook, we're cooking yogis. It's like Therika's acts from the time of the Buddha.¹³ When we walk, we're walking yogis. When we are ill, we're sick yogis. Whatever we do, whenever we do it, we can gain strength from every task.

If we're lacking sati, we amass suffering. Remember all the ills that Nga Du suffered. He was leveled by his experience. He was suffocated with fear, was burned, and sustained great harm.

If we have sati, it's a treasure. Precious wisdom is realized. If we take care of every concern with sati—from throwing trash in a garbage can, to dealing with loss due to theft, being sick, or eating our meals—and if we have wisdom underlying our actions, we will come to understand that these tasks are giving us practical experience to gain the foundational knowledge of vipassanā. They are giving us practical experience with which to combine our theoretical knowledge. If practical experience is joined with wisdom, we have the invaluable Dhamma. That's a treasure.

If we use sati as a tool to control how our time is consumed, we can reduce stress and worries. If we use sati to stay heedful of the fire, we can be free from its dangers. We can gain the best profits that a life can offer. Our livelihood and the Dhamma become linked as one. If we eat with sati, we gain profits from eating. Sila, samādhi, and vipassanā can all be involved while eating.

If we maintain sati while we are selling our goods at the market, we gain profits from our business. Dāna, sila, samādhi, and vipassanā can all be involved. Simply getting money from our shops isn't enough to say we earned a profit. Money is just a visitor. We may have it today, but it will be gone tomorrow. We may have it this week, but it will be gone next week. And in the end, we must part with whatever money we have. Money shouldn't be considered an entry in our ledgers. It's merely an entry on our guest lists, and life doesn't hold much meaning based on the entries of a guest list.

¹¹ In Myanmar, "yogi" refers to a lay meditator. It's used here as a play on words, with a change of spelling giving it the meaning "one who is sick."

¹² A play on words where bahwanah means "mental cultivation" and bawa-nah means "a worthless life."

¹³ A follower of the Buddha who attained awakening while she was cooking a meal.

Skillful deeds are what makes up a person's real ledger, nothing else. In the end, all of our material things will end up in someone else's account. We will have a chance to become a noble person only when we have a high balance in our Dhamma ledgers.

If we heed the fire and put forth effort while handling our daily activities, our ledgers will be filled by way of dāna, sīla, samādhi, and vipassanā, and we will profit. Practicing vipassanā is like watching our khandhas on television. Real news that is broadcast from our khandhas enables us to see and know things as they truly are. But if we don't tune in and watch, we won't know. If the news stream is cut off because we don't tune into it, we'll be lacking awareness. When we are unaware, the fires in the mind and the fires outside will besiege us because we can no longer be heedful of them.

To put it another way, vipassanā is a prosecution.¹⁴ This doesn't mean to prosecute someone in court. It means being able to bring your troubles and worries to an end with insight knowledge by maintaining sati. We can prevent one problem from turning into another one. That is adhering firmly to the Dhamma.

The old yogi Daw Mya, having reached the later stage of life, strove with full effort in her vipassanā practice. She adhered firmly to the Dhamma when she asked her grandchildren to do something and they didn't listen.

"When I speak, sometimes the children don't obey. It's the same with my old body. Actually, my body is even more defiant than they are. I ask it to become better and not to grow old, but it doesn't listen. It does the opposite. As it grows old, I ask it not to break down. When it breaks down, I ask it not to torture me, but it doesn't listen. Yes, my old body defies me more than the children."

That is adhering firmly to the Dhamma. If we are heedful of the fire, although everything may be going against our wishes, we don't have to burn because of it.

¹⁴ A play on words where tayahsweh, "prosecute" and tayah-sweh, "attach firmly to Dhamma" are homonyms.

Increase merit and heed the fire.

Just as no one can be separated from fire, no ordinary person can be free from the fires of kilesā. Fire isn't meant to reduce the world to ashes; it's to be used to temper materials or to cook food. Similarly, the fires of kilesā and a person's possessions don't have to just bring about worry and anxiety. They should be used as conditions for strengthening our resolve. But we will need an extraordinary level of sati to achieve that. Like the saying goes, "If you know how to go about it, there is always a way." Although there may be thorns on the path, if we walk with shoes, it's possible to proceed towards the destination without getting pricked. In the same way, although there are kilesā, it's possible to go on the path of Dhamma, proceeding with shoes of sati wisdom so we can reach the goal without kilesa fires burning us. If we look with sati wisdom for the prevailing kilesa, like wearing shoes through the thorny forest, we can reach the goal without being jabbed.

In the kitchen, although cooks are handling extremely hot pots every day, they can use potholders to avoid getting burned. Although there is heat, they don't get burned because there is a good buffer.

When fires burn in the world, although we can put them out with water, when there isn't a lot of water, the fire can't be stopped. We must be one step ahead of the fire to overcome it. But the fire will triumph if it's too great and is a step ahead of the water. If we look at dishes that are cooked daily in the kitchen, we will see that fire has been allowed to prevail over water. If we are heedful with the fire, our sati will be powerful enough to be a step ahead of it, and we will surely prevail over both the inner fires of kilesā and the external fires of the world.

In the time of the Buddha, there was a woman called Ma Sanda whose demeanor was always cool and peaceful, like the moon. Thanks to having good parents, relatives, and teachers, she understood and was drawn towards the Dhamma since her childhood. You could say she had plenty of water at her disposal for putting out fires. She also stayed one step ahead of the fire. She did every single thing with sati and practiced ardently.

When her friends asked her to go see a play that was being performed, she told them, "The show on the stage is portraying other people's stories. If we want peace and

tranquility, the show we should really be watching is the one being played out in our own lives.” Her perspective was one of clear comprehension, and so she never went to the shows.

When she became a young adult, her parents arranged her marriage with a wealthy man of the same class. Before long, without there being any wrongdoing on her part, her husband abandoned her for good. By virtue of sati, she sidestepped an enormous amount of suffering. She was able to maintain her smile and her steadiness of mind. She watched her own show with sati wisdom and stayed calm and peaceful.

“Nothing is really our own, apart from what we develop through the Dhamma. However we may part ways with another, if the Dhamma remains as our companion, so be it. The only thing that is on our true ledger is what we’ve gained through Dhamma. If he hadn’t left me now, we would have become separated one way or another sooner or later. If nothing else, it’s certain we would have become separated by death. But because he left me while I’m still young, I will have more time to make the Dhamma my focus. His leaving even encouraged me to meet my own companion of truth,” she said with a clear, calm attitude.

We practice Dhamma to build strength so that we can live a good life, to have an equanimous mind when there are difficulties, and to die in a good mindset, not beset with worries.

When we are proactive in heeding the fire, although we may run into sadness and grief, we can be protected so the fires of being overcome with sorrow don’t burn. If they do burn, we can immediately put them out. That is a life of victory. Social problems need not lead us to our downfall and impoverish us. They can instead urge us to be alert and courageous.

If we’re walking down the road and there are strong winds blowing our clothes around, we don’t pull them off. We intently hold on to them so they don’t blow around and fly off, don’t we? And when we come up hard against the unavoidable vicissitudes of life, it’s not skillful to lose sati or to discard the clothing of Dhamma.¹⁵ To be firm in the Dhamma, we must thoroughly hold on with sati wisdom. What need would there be for the Dhamma if everything in the world followed along with our wishes? Dhamma is needed so that we can reconcile ourselves with the world. It’s not enough just to be attracted to the Dhamma. We need to be thrust towards it with a sense of urgency by experiencing unwanted events, so that we may practice ardently while we have the opportunity.

¹⁵ The vicissitudes of life are the eight worldly conditions: gain/loss, status/disgrace, praise/criticism, and pleasure/pain. [Lokavipatti Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya 8.6].

Ma Sanda who watched her own show and made sati wisdom her constant companion, avoided catching fire. With a clear and unshakable vision, she put forth effort in practicing the Buddha's teaching and became an arahant. All worldly problems are resolved upon attaining arahantship. Like the cool moon that is always in harmony with the world, Ma Sanda lived in peace with everything. Dhamma took prominence for her and her fires were extinguished. Always be heedful of the fire.

How to use the fire extinguisher of sati:

1. Have a clear sense of the things you want to do. If you want to pay homage to the Buddha, let the Buddha be in your mind. If you want to spread *mettā*, let the object of your *mettā* meditation be in your mind. If you want to concentrate on the in-and-out breath, make the in-and-out breath the object of your attention. If you want to practice vipassanā to gain wisdom on the khandhas, let the khandhas be in your mind. Coming and going, performing activities, all matters must be in your mind as you perform them so that this fire extinguisher can be used.
2. When your object of thought appears, you should attach your mind to it firmly, not allowing it to separate.
3. You should maintain your complete attention for the duration of the task. If your attention is lost, the fire extinguisher can no longer work.
4. While performing a task, you must be able to block out other objects of thought to keep them from disrupting your attention. If objects of thought get mixed, your thread of attention will break, and your stability can be lost. That's also when fires can start. Because the mind can take only one sense object at a time, you should only do one task at a time, so it can be neatly completed. You should only move on to the next task after the first one is finished.
5. While you are performing a task, in order to be aware of it at its beginning, middle, and end, all perceptions must be connected one by one. Whatever you do, while you are doing it, you must practice to be aware of it in its entirety. You must carefully patch any holes in your mind with sati to prevent your Dhamma strength from leaking out. Mending the tears in your mind will allow you to be at full strength.
6. You must regard every task as being important. For those who meet with the Buddha's teachings, no one task is more important than another. There's no such thing as an unimportant task, and each task must be handled one at a time. If a few important things are clustered together, they can become jumbled up and lost.

In this period of time in which the human life-span has become shortened, a person's life isn't that long at all. Maybe it will last several decades. It may reach a hundred years, but that's not easy to do. Even if we have extremely good kamma and reach one hundred, the suffering and the oppression of the effects of aging and illness are so great that the body is not really useful any longer.

It's difficult to come into contact with the Buddha's teaching even in one life out of a hundred thousand, and in one world out of a hundred thousand. Even if the teaching does appear, not one person out of a hundred thousand can have the right view to take it on. So, while we are in the position of having a human life and having encountered the Dhamma, we should use sati as a way to control how our time is spent and try our best each day to profit from the Dhamma before this good opportunity is lost. Every time we are without sati, fires inside and outside can burn. Meritorious deeds of dāna, sila, and bhāvanā, which make up the ledgers of our lives can be lost. To that end, above all else, be heedful of the fire.

“May you all put out the fires.”

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Glossary

Appamāda: Vigilance.

Bhāvanā: Developing the mind by means of thought or meditation.

Dāna: Giving.

Dukkha: Stress, discomfort, suffering—brought on by birth, aging, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair; association with the unbeloved; separation from the loved; and not getting what is wanted. In brief, the five clinging-aggregates are dukkha. [Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Saṃyutta Nikāya 56:11].

Kamma: Intentional act (i.e., physical action, speech, or thought). [Nibbedhika Sutta, Aṅguttara Nikāya 6:63].

Khandhas: Aggregates, which condition the appearance of life in any form. There are five: rūpa (physical form); vedanā (three modes of feeling—pleasure, pain, or indifferent); saññā (perception); saṅkhāra (thought construct), and viññāṇa (consciousness).

Kilesā: Defilements, impurities of mind—i.e., lobha (greed), dosa (anger), moha (delusion), māna (conceit), ditthi (wrong view), vicikicchā (doubt), thīna (mental torpor), uddhacca (distraction), ahirika (shamelessness), and anottappa (lack of compunction). [Vibhaṅga XII].

Nibbāna: Liberation; the release of the mind from all kilesā, and from the entire round of death and rebirth.

Mettā: Goodwill, benevolence.

Paññā: Understanding, wisdom, insight.

Sacca: Truth.

Saṃsāra: Transmigration, wandering through cycle of rebirth and death.

Samādhi: Concentration.

Sati: Memory, mindfulness.

Sīla: Virtue; moral practice.

Vipassanā: Insight.

Viriya: Effort, persistence.

Tipitaka Yaw Sayadaw

Yaw Sayadaw (Ashin Sirindabhivamsa) was born in Letpan Village, Gangaw Township, Magwe Division, Myanmar on March 26, 1943 (the 6th Waning day of the month of TaBaung, in Myanmar Era 1304) to parents U Ye Naing and Daw Toke Khaing. He became a novice at age fourteen and again at age eighteen, and was fully ordained at the age of twenty with the name Ashin Sirinda. He went on to continue his studies of the Pāli Tipiṭaka, its commentaries, and subcommentaries in Mandalay and Yangon. Sayadaw's decades' worth of extensive study of the Vinaya, Sutta, and Abhidhamma Piṭakas at the highest levels culminated in him being awarded the title of Tipiṭakadhara Tipiṭakakawida, or, "One who knows the Tipiṭaka by heart." Sayadaw is currently the abbot of Mahavisuddharama TaikThit Monastery in Yangon, and oversees several other monasteries in Myanmar.